"MURDER"

AN ADDRESS

DELIVERED BY

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My theme is murder. I shall not fatigue you with technical definitions of the crime and with nice distinctions between it and other kinds of slaughter. I shall confine myself to sketches of some classes of murderers, and some of the methods, by which the atrocious crime is committed. I shall then endeavor to arouse in your minds and hearts a strong feeling, if it does not already exist there, against the inhuman practices which I shall speak of, and I hope to have you join me in heartfelt regret that capital punishment is not meted out in every instance of guilt; and also in a sentiment of gratitude that enlightened gentlemen have inaugurated here in Emory College a movement for the suppression of this awful crime.

I have said that I shall not trouble you with definitions and nice distinctions, and I shall not. But nevertheless I shall distinguish between some of the characteristics of the crime and of the criminals. I shall show that the largest class of murderers are not impelled by particular malice, but are actuated by what is known as general malice. They are those, who entertain no settled purpose to murder and provide themselves with no particular weapons of destruction, but slay with anything at hand—as it were a stone, a club, a ragged stick. They do not meditate deliberate murder; but their moral sense is feeble and their ignorance is great, and they murder without rightly knowing that they do so. This class, though more numerous, is less dangerous than any other; because the members of it soon betray their true character, and all are on guard against them.

Another class goes better prepared for the commission of the crime. Its members do not attempt it so frequently, but there is a deadlier certainty in their efforts. They, too, are not at heart deliberate murderers, but they find their prototypes and congeners among the bearers of the concealed pistol. Neither my murderer, nor the pistol hero, starts out with the deliberate purpose of murder, but the convenient appliances are at hand, and so they do murder on every apt occasion.

The only other class, which I shall specify, is that of the deliberate murderer—those who, in States which grade the crime, would be rated murderers in the first degree. These sit in their closets, their offices, and plan murder, meditate it, work it up laboriously, and then go forth and commit it deliberately. To this class belong the poisoners.

For the purpose of description, and to summon the murderer before you more conveniently, I shall adopt the device of the old dramatists—notably Shakspeare—who, disdaining ordinarily to give names to the miscreants whom they employed for the exigencies of the tragedy, simply numbered them "First Murderer," "Second Murderer," and so on. And so at the proper time I will give the equivalent of the stage manager's signal: "Enter first murderer," "enter second murderer," "enter third murderer."

But in order that I may allay any nervousness among the most timid of my auditors, I take this early occasion to state that the murder, of which I have spoken and propose further to speak, is not "the unlawful killing of a human being in the peace of the State with malice aforethought, either express or implied;" and neither my first, second nor third murderer drips with human gore. The murder I speak of is the murder of the King's English, and the murderers are those of our own household. If any one breathes freer at this announcement I beg that he will not abate, in any considerable degree, the indignation and horror which would be justly excited by the thought of actual human murder; for strong should be our reprobation of the unprovoked, unnecessary, unspairing slaughter of our unoffending language.

The murderer of the first class needs not much attention. He is for the most part a sinner through ignorance. The class is composed of that large number of our fellow-creatures, who make deadly havoc of the ordinary every day language, current in the household and in the mart. The little that will be said of the murderer of this class, will contain this of extenuation, he slays without malace. He has no malice against verbs, adverbs, nouns or pronouns. Against adjectives, participles, prepositions or conjunctions he has no ancient grudge; he does not even know them. His usual victim is syntax; but he has no particular malice against syntax. The parts of speech have done him no harm, and he has no sweet revenge against them to gratify. Yet he slays them with a pen, that is deadly, and a tongue, that spares not. As he acts without malice, perhaps he should not be styled a murderer. But the law sometimes departs from pure logic and is guided by a sound policy. Thus, it is the policy of the law, which will not permit a man, too intoxicated to entertain any purpose, malicious or otherwise, to slay a human being and the slaughter to be aught but murder. The same policy pronounces him a murderer, who wantonly hurls a stone into a crowed and slays

one whom he hated not, knew not. On the same principle must we deal with that man, who blindly lays about him with a tongue, lost to all sense of linguistic duty, or with a pen, that recks naught of parts of speech, and with one or the other weapon commits reckless and indiscriminate slaughter.

I call this first murderer "the grammatical murderer"—which appellation, however, is not subjective but objective, and designates not the criminal himself, who is not at all grammatical, but his victim, the murdered grammar.

Let us, however, be just, and accord to this class of murderers such mitigation of their crime as can be found in their ignorance. The crime here spoken of consists in those solecisms of syntax and even blunders of orthography, prevalent among the ignorant and the careless. As savage people lightly slay their fellow-creatures, not because the God of all the earth has made their hearts by nature worse than the hearts of enlightened peoples, but because, in their ignorance, they are like the beasts of the forest; and as the corrective with them is knowledge and enlightment, so with those enemies of orthography and syntax, the spelling book and the grammar will in time convert those blind ravagers of the language into good citizens of the Republic of Letters—And with this hopeful view I dismiss them.

I wish I could speak as hopefully and as charitably of my second murderer, who, with the same caution already given in the case of the first murderer in reference to subjectiveness and objectiveness, I call the purity murderer—the assassin of the purity of the language.

This offender is more enlightened than the first, and to that extent can claim less of charitable forbearance. While the former lays about him in stupid recklessness with such weapons as chance provides, the second arms himself beforehand. It is true he entertains no settled, deadly malice towards the purity of the language; but he has his ends to attain, and he will slay it if it interferes with them. He makes deadly assaults upon the language by the use of words not belonging to it, or, if belonging to it, wrested from their legitimate use and signification. He has many lethal weapons in his arsenal, but his favorite is a barbarous one, bearing a barbarous name—SLANG.

There are some implements of destruction, the very sight of which inspires horror. I have seen in collections of medieval weapons poniards twisted and curled and toothed, so as not only to inflict death, but to carry torture with it. In the

same spirit of diabolism is fashioned the horrid "creese" of the Malay pirate. And our own free American bowie knife, with its manifest capabilities for making a dreadful incised wound, then enlarging it, and by deft turning to the right and left, inflicting a high degree of tortue is calculated by its sight merely to curdle the blood of the ordinary citizen.

Like unto all these is the weapon "slang." It is uncouth, it is deadly, it is torturing. With these characteristics, it is a favorite with the purity murderer. The class, contributing most freely to this type of murder, are the local editors and paragraphists of the newspapers; and slang is their chosen weapon. But conversationalists also use it. Your popular orator enlivens the dullness of his discourse by flourishing it; the young men, emulous of the reputation of society wits, brandish it even in the parlors of the polite and, alas! alas! as Lucrezia Borgia, the most fascinating woman of her time, cultured in intellect, rich in accomplishments, charming in manners, beautiful under the warm sky of Italy with the beauty of the North—the blue eye, the fair skin, the blonde hair—not morose and gloomy, as one would suppose from her career, but gay, light hearted, sunny tempered—as this paragon of womanly attractions was withal a pitiless murderess, so, alas! alas! the adorable young woman of the period wields this weapon of slang without stint and without ruth. I will not liken her to Athene standing by Achilles and guiding the flight of his javelin, for while in this Homeric picture there are blood and death there are also open war and the gleam of knightly weapons; but rather do I liken her to the dreadful shape of Ate, revelling with uncouth and horrid weapons in indiscriminate slaughter.

Some crimes bring their own swift retribution. None more surely than the use of slang. The form the punishment assumes is almost total deprivation of speech. I have not the time to elaborate this idea, but I shall endeavor to illustrate it by a familiar example. The simple, frequently grand and beautiful, always appropriate, terms to express things important or imposing in the physical or the moral world, have dropped out of the speech of a large number of our fellow-citizens, addicted to the use of slang. Instead of the language of civilized man, selected and used according to the requirements of each occasion, these wretched criminals, overtaken by a punishment of their own providing, are reduced on all occasions to the use of the same monosyllable—"boom." Like the monotone of an idiot is the utterance which greets every

reference to what is striking or grand. The prosperity of the country, "boom;" the happiness of the people, "boom;" the enthusiasm of an assemblage of freemen, "boom;" the popularity of a candidate, "boom;" his worked up, manufactured strength—this also "boom." Great feats of arms, "boom." Great triumphs of oratory, "boom." The raging of a storm, "boom."—The majestic flowing of a river, "boom." The blessing of Heaven, shown in succession of rain and sunshine, producing the waving fields and promising the abounding harvest, "boom." Anything, Boom! Everything BOOM!

Deprive the poor creatures of this idiotic monosyllable, and they are reduced to a condition verging on dumbness. How many editors, how many speakers, how many conversationalists have lost the language, in which to describe greatness or grandeur in anything by reason of their dependence on this absurd gibberish.

But our greatest horror is reserved for the poisoner. So I designate the style murderer. The speaker, the writer, who, perverting the language from its proper use, viz: to serve as the simple but grand vehicle of the ideas of the mind, the emotions of the heart, the longings of the soul: to be the teacher, the entertainer, the messenger of truth, the pure handmaiden, ready to serve mind and heart in her own chaste and simple way—the writer, who perverts the language, which ought to be thus regarded, into an instrument of strained conceits, bombastic utterances, extravagance in words with meanness of ideas—who, using it not merely for speaking or writing something which it were well to write or speak, but for effect only, for the gratification of vanity in fine writing or fine speaking; who, discarding all moderation of praise or censure, dealing in hyperboles, taking everything—ordinary mortals and the ordinary affairs of life—out of their natural air and light, elevates them to the stars or depresses them to the realms of eternal night—him I call the poisoner. He is a murderer, for these practices are deadly and require thought and deliberation. And inasmuch as his death-dealing agencies pervade the whole system of his victim, I call him the poisoner.

The case of this murderer, I fear, is hopeless; but thanks to whatever overruling power, thanks are due—there is a specific antidote for his poison—"SIMPLICITY."

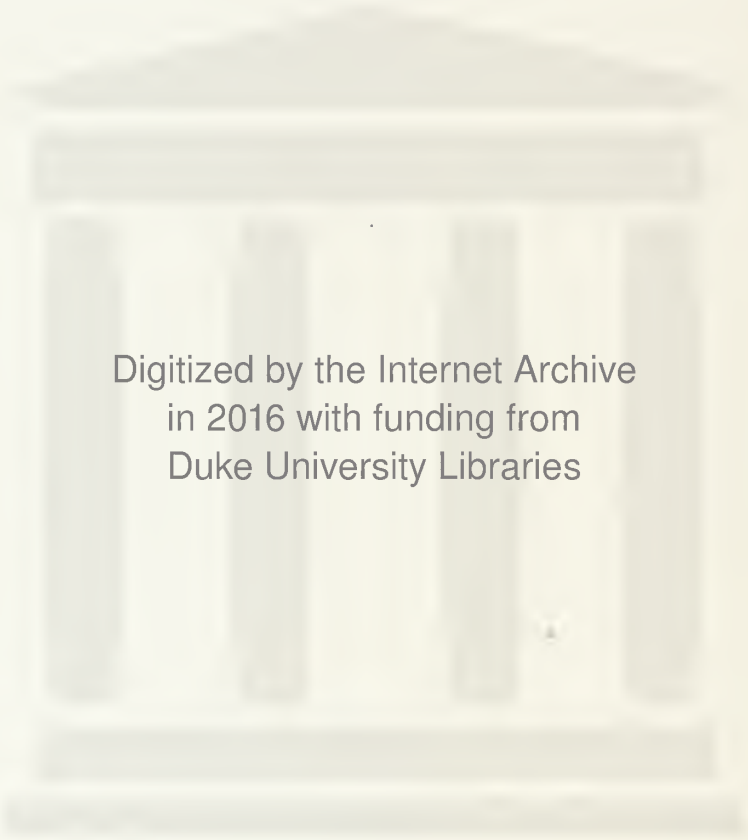
But dropping the conceit of murder and murderers, how really inexcusable the wrongs we do that which we lovingly call our "mother tongue." If our sentiment toward it were

more in keeping with this affectionate appellation how much more careful and tender we would be with it. If even discarding all sentiment, we consider it simply as a convenient instrument of every day use, how much better we would find it to keep it clean and bright. Regarding it as the vehicle of the soul's great creations, why convert into a creaking road wagon this chariot of fire, fitted to scale the battlements of Heaven.

In that respect, in which the language is most important to us, our daily ordinary intercouse, it is as easy to use it well as ill. As handled by the masters of it, it is pure, and yet so copious as to need no assistance from the flippant barbarisms of modern invention. Of course, there will be a new language of arts and sciences as they are discovered or expanded. I speak not of it, but of language as the vehicle of intellectual and moral ideas—the vernacular of the old humen heart—"The sole indestructible state Time can touch with no change. Which before Rome, before Carthage was such, as it will be when London and Paris are gone." This language needs no accession to its full and compact population, but needs only to be protected from invasion by the barbarians. Style is form, and form is art. The loftiest heights of art were reached long ago in language no less than in painting, sculpture and architecture. And as the painter of to-day cannot equal Raphael, of the fifteenth century, and as even Thorwaldsen of our own time could not attain to the height of Phidias in the age of Pericles; nor can the new houses of Parliament be named with the Parthenon; so we cannot improve in the style of writing and speaking upon the old masters. Our attempts to do so but produce grotesqueness and deformity. Take the three ways, upon which I have commented, by which the language is wounded in the house of its friends, and consider a moment. When we compare the diction of one speaking our every day language with correctness and in simplicity with the incorrect and slovenly manner, in which his neighbor may handle the same instrument, what reason can be given for the course of the latter? When we read the glorious pages of Macaulay, rich to opulence in ideas and expression, all couched in purest English, what reason can be given for seeking reinforcements or slang? When we read the clear, simple, easy, compact pages, so abounding in the English classics, what reason can be given for the strained but ineffectual, the extravagant, but weak, contortions of the popular orator and the contemporaneous press. Nay, I with-

draw these questions and frame an easier. I ask not for reasons, but demand what excuse can be given for the slovenliness of ordinary speech, for the jargon of slang and the labored vices of journalistic style?

One word more. The true mission of the champion of the English language is not reform, but defense. The true legend to be emblazoned on his shield is not Reformer, but "Defender." His true policy is not the conquest of new realms, but the integrity of the old. Take the dear mother tongue as it exists under your watchful protection and guard it sacredly; and that you may appreciate the sacredness of the duty, think what is that mother tongue in its purity, undisfigured, undeformed, unpoisoned by the murderous practices I have spoken of. It is all-sufficient for the wants of domestic and friendly intercourse. It is the language, in which humor and pathos have formed the closest alliance. It is the language, in which the orator, secular or sacred, finds scope, boundless as the air, free as the ocean. On the wings of this English language, epic poetry has made its subliemst flights; and in its accents, the lyric poets have sung their sweetest strains. In its terms, have the truest principles of civil liberty been formulated. It is Freedom's true mother tongue. Clear enough for the philosopher, sublime enough for the poet, robust enough for the orator, airy enough for the wit, tender enough for the lover—in a word, possessed in its purity of all linguistic excellencies, keep watch and ward over this great treasure and repel all who would approach it with unhallowed hands.



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